Interview with David E. Simcox

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

DAVID E. SIMCOX

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Today is August 26, 1993. This is an interview for the Foreign Affairs Oral History Program with Mr. David E. Simcox.

Q: Mr. Simcox, I'd like to begin with a little bit about your background, such as where you were born, where you grew up, and where you went to school—that sort of thing.

SIMCOX: All right. I was born in Frankfort, Kentucky, on November 25, 1932. I went to grade school and high school there and received my first college degree from the University of Kentucky in 1956. I took the Foreign Service exam, was accepted, and went off to Washington in 1956. While I was in Washington, working for the State Department, I enrolled in American University and obtained a master's degree there.

So, I'm a Kentucky boy. I lived the first five years of my life in Louisville and came back here after I left the Washington scene about one year ago.

Q: And what first interested you in foreign affairs and how did you come to join the Foreign Service?

SIMCOX: I guess my interest in foreign affairs goes back to World War II. When I was a little boy, I'd listen to all the news broadcasts on what was going on on the Eastern and Western fronts and in the South Pacific. I always liked geography as a subject. I used to brief my Daddy when he came home from work as to what had happened on the Eastern front, where the Soviets were battling with the Nazis, and how the Marines were doing on Guadalcanal. So naturally I followed the peace process after World War II, which led, in effect, to the redivision of the world.

I went into the Marine Corps in 1952 and served until 1954. I was sent to Korea at the tail end of the Korean War. What I saw in Korea encouraged me to pursue an international career. I saw the United Nations people there. It seemed like a very good way of life—very stimulating and very challenging. So when I got out of the Marine Corps and returned to college, that was my interest. I tailored my education to prepare myself for a Foreign Service career.

Q: Your first assignment was from August, 1956, to November, 1957, where you were assigned to the Foreign Service Institute [FSI]. How did that come about and what were your duties in that job?

SIMCOX: Well, that was my first assignment. I was a very green, inexperienced young man who had no noticeable technical skills. I was dragooned into that job from the FSI class. There were some 30 members of the class which began in August, 1956. Before I could even start the class, I was taken out of it and put in charge of the A-100 class, the Foreign Service basic training course. I was not so much in charge of the class but rather in making arrangements for it—schedule making and all of that. Really, it wasn't all of that rewarding a job. Perhaps the most rewarding aspect of it was that I got to meet all of the members of the Foreign Service classes as they came through. I made a lot of contacts with Foreign Service Officers who entered in the following year [1957].

Q: Just out of curiosity, were you the one pulled out of your class because you excelled or...

SIMCOX: Probably the opposite. Probably they looked at the class and identified the one who had the least education and the least promising prospects and said, “We'll do the least damage by putting this guy in this job.”

Q: Well, after the Foreign Service Institute, you were then assigned to Mexico from 1957 to 1960 as a consular officer and a Third Secretary [of Embassy] and in the office of the labor attach#. What were your duties in each of these capacities and how did they differ from one another?

SIMCOX: As a consular officer I did visa work—principally starting off with immigrant visas. In those days there was a large number, just as now, of Mexican immigrants going off to work on farms. The immigration law was very liberal then. There was no quota for Mexico. So we probably sent 40 to 50,000 people to the U.S. as permanent residents per year. Then I switched over to the non-immigrant visa line. This was a real madhouse. We had to issue 900 to 1,000 visas a day, which meant, in my case, about 200-250 interviews. You can imagine that quality control wasn't all of that good on all of those interviews. I just had a minute or two to make a decision. Then I did citizenship and passport work. And, of course, all of us had to take our turns on the weekend on the so-called protection service, aiding and assisting Americans who got into difficulty in Mexico. They would call the Consulate. They were out of money, were in trouble with the Police, or someone would call the Consulate to say that they had died. There weren't too many ground rules as to how you helped them, nor was there much money that you could give them. So it was really a creative process, figuring out what you could do for them.

Q: And what about...

SIMCOX: Well, I was lucky. After a year and a half in the consular section, the Embassy began a process of rotating junior officers through the various sections. I had helped out the labor attach#, who didn't speak Spanish, by going to some meetings with him where I acted as an interpreter. I look back on that period and shudder when I realize how poor my Spanish was then. I think of how many mistaken ideas and wrong impressions I may have given by my inadequate knowledge of Spanish. However, bad as my Spanish was, it was better than that of my supervisor [the labor attach#]. So when a position opened up in his office, he asked that I be transferred to it as his assistant. I spent the remaining year and a half of my time in Mexico City, working on Mexico's labor situation. I got to know the trade unions, following and reporting on industrial relations in Mexico and the trade union movement, as well as the “bracero” [laborer] agreement. That was one of the more interesting aspects.

At that time the United States and Mexico had a migrant labor agreement. This really went back to 1942-43. By the time 1957-58 rolled around, the program was in a lot of political disfavor in the United States. There was a lot of exploitation of the workers, and there were a lot of opportunities for international misunderstanding because many American farmers mistreated the Mexican “braceros” when they went to the United States. When they were mistreated, they would complain to the Mexican Consuls, who would then complain to us and to the [Mexican] Foreign Ministry, which would call us in for meetings to investigate this or that case of discrimination or mistreatment. The “bracero” program was principally run by the [U. S.] Labor Department. The Labor Department didn't have any representative in the Embassy in Mexico to handle these matters, so we became the intermediaries, taking all of the guff for the Labor Department and trying to keep up to date on what the Labor Department's thinking was on these issues.

That was interesting to me because I had worked on the immigrant visa and subsequently on the “bracero” program. It gave me an interest in Mexico's whole population question —demography, manpower, and immigration—which is still very much a live issue in our

foreign relations now. Illegal immigration was high then, and it's higher than ever now. The possibility of serious, international controversy over the mistreatment of Mexican nationals in the United States is very much with us.

Q: So your experience in Mexico—after you retired from the Foreign Service in 1985—brought you to become the director of the Center for Immigration Studies. Is that the result of your experience during your stay in Mexico?

SIMCOX: Yes.

Q: What is the purpose of the Center for Immigration Studies?

SIMCOX: Well, it's a non-profit, public interest group, set up by grants from foundations and individual donors. In my view those donations were not substantial enough, because now I was trying to raise the funds we need to survive. We are supported by foundations and one or two individual donors and the sale of our publications. Essentially, the Center was set up by people who were concerned that immigration into the United States is unregulated and out of control. The Center was established to prepare studies and policy analyses and participate in the legislative process by giving testimony on the Hill [i.e., to Congress]. So the center is a kind of “think tank” on immigration as it relates to population and to labor conditions and the U. S. economy, society, demography, and the environment.

Q: And you are still involved with the Center?

SIMCOX: Yes, I am. Even though I'm down here now, I'm still a Senior Fellow at the Center. I write for them and undertake programs for them. I just got back last week from Chicago, for example, where I made a TV appearance on WTTW for a public affairs program on immigration.

Q: So you are also, right now—getting back to the population question—a senior adviser to Negative Population Growth, Inc. Are these organizations related?

SIMCOX: No, they're not. They're separate organizations, with somewhat different approaches. Although Negative Population Growth has been in existence for years, in recent years it has come to consider uncontrolled immigration as a major element in what they regard as extremely rapid population growth in the United States. They are latecomers to the immigration issue.

Q: To return to your Foreign Service career, your next assignment [following your tour in Mexico City] was back in Washington where you were a policy reports officer in the Bureau of European Affairs from December, 1960, to October, 1962. What sort of things did you do in that job?

SIMCOX: When I left Mexico, I had orders to go to Dublin, Ireland, as economic officer. In the process of going from Mexico to Dublin, I became very sick with hepatitis. The Department canceled my assignment to Dublin. I had to stay in the States because I couldn't get a medical clearance. I was then assigned to the Bureau of European Affairs, and they put me in a job in the Assistant Secretary's office. Essentially, this job involved summarizing telegrams that came in, picking out those that were of interest to other posts, which may not have received them, and working occasionally on the early morning shift which began at 4:00 AM, preparing summaries of telegrams and intelligence reports and that sort of thing.

Q: Upon completion of your work in Washington you were sent to our Embassy in Panama, as a political officer, and then to the Panamanian Province of Chiriqui as the principal officer at the Consulate [in David]. How did these two jobs differ and what sort of things did you do?

SIMCOX: Well, Panama is a strange country. I enjoyed myself there and the work, probably about as much as in any country that I was ever assigned to. The Panamanian people are a little flaky but they're delightful and wonderful—and so unpredictable. In the Embassy I was a political officer. I was paired up with Diego Asencio, who was the other [political officer]. Diego subsequently went on to greater and greater things and ultimately became an ambassador and Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs and head of the President's Commission on Immigration.

But in Panama the whole issue concerned the [Panama] Canal. It's a single issue country. Other things were developing, and we probably didn't give them as much attention as we should have. The old order was beginning to change then, and a new middle class was emerging in Panama that was even more nationalistic and more determined to take the reins of government into its own hands. But our principal interest—virtually our only interest, as we perceived it then—was the Canal. So after I had worked in the Embassy for almost two years, I was given a new assignment. Ambassador Jack Vaughn came in, replacing Ambassador Joseph Harlan. The new ambassador arranged for the opening of a new consular post in David, in Chiriqui Province, the westernmost part of Panama next to the Costa Rican border.

David was the country's third largest city. “City” is probably a misrepresentation. I considered it a town, but its residents considered it a city. The whole consular district had about 50,000 people. David was chosen for a new consular post because, at that time, that our only Consulate outside the Embassy had been in Colon, about 30 miles away from the Embassy at the other [Caribbean] end of the Canal. It was felt that we needed to get out more, have a greater presence, and show the flag and our role in Panama. Therefore, a one-man post was opened at David. I was Principal Officer there for a little more than a year.

Q: When you were there, what seemed to be the Panamanian attitude toward the United States?

SIMCOX: In western Panama, in Chiriqui and Bocas del Toro Provinces, the issue of the Canal was much less important. They had other interests. They had to earn their living through more normal types of activity, like agriculture. So the big thing there was the banana plantations in the area. At that time the United Fruit Company had its share of public relations and labor problems. Also, the process of the radicalization of Panama —I use this as a relative term—was still going on. It was there that I got to know two of the people who subsequently became the most important in Panama. Omar Torrijos was a military officer commanding the Bocas del Toro-Chiriqui Military Zone, with his headquarters in David. I got to know him very well before he took over the government [in Panama City]. He had a young lieutenant working for him as an intelligence officer by the name of Manuel Noriega. So I knew Noriega “when,” before he became “Mr. Power” in Panama.

Q: So at that time was Panama trying to move toward a more democratic system—or was that how you perceived it?

SIMCOX: Its government was not democratic. It was a government that had all of the trappings of democracy. There was a Parliament, a Supreme Court, and elections. But it was basically an oligarchy, controlled by the most powerful families, which managed somehow to make the elections come out their way. When they couldn't, the National Guard would step in and dismiss the candidate who had been elected “incorrectly” and replace him with the candidate of the oligarchy. So it was an interesting process to watch there.

The biggest fly in the ointment for this oligarchical system in those days was a man called Arnulfo Arias, a spellbinding, charismatic leader—very erratic, and a very poor administrator. He was repeatedly elected President of Panama and repeatedly thrown

out or denied the right to take office. But he lived up there, in that part of the country [David area]. I had instructions from the Embassy not to engage him in any sort of dialogue, which I respected. I did see him one day when I was in the back country up near Boquete. I was driving a jeep on a dirt road and I saw this figure on a white horse. When I approached him, I recognized that it was Doctor Arias. He was out, looking over his country plantation. So, in spite of the Embassy's objections, I stopped the car, got out and introduced myself, and talked to him while he sat on his horse.

Q: That's pretty neat. Well, at the time you were in Panama, and the U. S. and Panama were having some problems, particularly concerning the Canal Zone, and I think that you were there during the time that—who was in charge of the Canal Zone who was murdered? I can't think of his name—I think it was David...

SIMCOX: Well, I was there at the time of the very serious riots in January, 1964.

Q: It began at the Balboa High School [in the Canal Zone]. The American students raised the American flag, and not the Panamanian flag, and the Panamanian students rioted. At the time did you think that there were any pro-Castro communists who were inciting the riots? Did you see any sort of connection with that?

SIMCOX: I'm sure there were some Castro sympathizers out there, but the riot was a very special kind of process. There was a lot of rage in Panama, and it expressed itself that night—those nights—in direct attacks on the Canal Zone. Some of the rage was justifiable. The Panamanians involved in the riot were expressing their rage at the social inequality of conditions in the slums adjacent to the Canal Zone. So it's hard to say that the riot was conceived and directed by Castro communists. In fact I never felt that way.

Q: During your time there did you see any sort of policy changes between the Kennedy and the Johnson administrations concerning how you were supposed to act [in dealing with Panama]?

SIMCOX: It was the Johnson administration that finally took the major step of saying, “Enough of this fooling around with cosmetic trappings that try to give the impression that somehow the Panamanians have control over the Canal. Let us really commit ourselves to make major changes that will give them the feeling of participation and ownership [of the Canal].” That process began way back then. It took forever to culminate, during the Carter administration.

Q: After Panama you moved on to the Dominican Republic and were the political officer in the Embassy in Santo Domingo from June, 1966, to June, 1967. What was the relationship between the United States and the Dominican Republic at that time?

SIMCOX: There was a serious insurrection there in April, 1965—virtually a civil war. We sent in 22,000 troops, in effect, to establish order and take over the administration of the country. It started out as a unilateral, American intervention, but it was ultimately “blessed” by the Organization of American States [OAS]. Four or five other members of the OAS nations also sent troops to constitute an OAS peace force. Most of the soldiers were limited to the city of Santo Domingo because the rest of the country was quiet.

There was a government in power headed by a man named Garcia Godoy. He worked closely with the OAS representatives there, including Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, whom I got to know there. Bunker was a master at gaining people's confidence and imposing a sense of trust and serenity in very tense situations like this. So it was almost like being—not so much as a representative to a sovereign foreign country but as a pro-consul, a civilian, political officer under an army of occupation. Perhaps that sounds a bit extreme.

Q: What was your job then?

SIMCOX: Well, our job was principally a reporting job, showing the flag, and trying to influence all of the politicians of the democratic parties to work together to try to develop a

government that could take over from the interim government—a truly elected government. So some of us worked with the Democratic Revolutionary Party under Juan Bosch. My assignment was to work with him and his group to try to encourage them to participate fully in democratic elections. Others worked with the "Reformista Party" under Doctor Balaguer. Well, they had the elections, and Doctor Balaguer won in a landslide. Juan Bosch, who had been elected President before and been expelled by the [Dominican] military, was badly defeated. There was a good deal of concern on our part that he would call on his followers to rise up and claim that the elections were fraudulent. However, in effect, he "swallowed" the election outcome. Balaguer became President and served for four years and then for an additional four years. I think that, altogether, he spent 12 years or more as President. He was a very mild mannered, strange man, seemingly almost timid, a poet. He never married. He lived at home with his mother. But he ruled that country with efficiency.

Q: Your next post was in the African country of Ghana, where you served as the political officer at the Embassy in Accra from June, 1967, to August, 1969. What was our relationship with Ghana at that time?

SIMCOX: I arrived there, perhaps a year after Kwame Nkrumah, the spellbinding, charismatic strong man of Ghanaian politics who had led the country since independence, was driven out of office. A military government was in charge, headed by a man named Gen. A. A. Ankrah, a soldier without too many social refinements or a deep sense of statecraft. The United States, I think, considered the overthrow of Nkrumah in Ghana as a major achievement in terms of reversing what, in those days, was regarded as extensive Soviet influence in many African countries and a wave of Soviet-inspired radicalism. This brought an opportunity for the United States to help develop Ghana as a showplace of a free society, with free enterprise, foreign investment, a market economy, and all of that.

Well, it became clear during the two years that I was there that Ghana was a long way from any form of stability. There were constant plots, and there was one serious Army mutiny, not too long after I arrived which resulted in some deaths in the military

establishment. They struggled, during the two years that I was there, to try and establish some basis for an elected, civilian government. They finally did. What I think of as the oligarchs of Ghana, whose power and influence go back to the days of the British Imperium—those were the forces which won the election. But their rule was really ineffectual. They won that election just as I left the country in 1969. A relatively non-productive government assumed office which, again, was overturned by the military within a year.

Q: What did you do to promote our policy, as a political officer?

SIMCOX: Political officers are general busybodies. Each officer decides for himself, I think, sooner or later, what his principal priority is. Is he going to be a witness to the process, to observe and report and keep Washington informed and present the situation and act on instructions he gets back from Washington. Or is he going to get out and become something of a missionary to the different political parties, urging them really to take democracy seriously, trying to put them in touch with groups and people in the United States and Europe that can also help and encourage them to move in the direction of democratic practices. There was some of that in all of us.

Q: So which way did you lean toward?

SIMCOX: I guess my concern was that it was automatically assumed that the United States was for the same candidates that the military favored, such as Doctor Kofi Busia. The other candidate, Komle Gbedemah, was tarred by his earlier association with Nkrumah. He was known as a very efficient, public administrator and a rather charismatic leader. Part of my mission, as I saw it, was to try to convince him and his followers that the United States didn't have a favorite candidate, that it was not partial to Doctor Busia.

Of course, we often hear that the Foreign Service takes positions like that. There's always a lingering doubt in your mind whether you can really say this in a credible way, because there's so much going on that we don't know about. To this day I don't know what the U.

S. role, if any, was in getting Doctor Busia elected. One suspects that the powers that be, back in Washington, whether in Foggy Bottom [Department of State] or Langley [CIA] were just not comfortable with the idea of Gbedemah taking over the government.

Q: Another question about Ghana. In March, 1958, Ambassador Franklin Williams resigned and was replaced by Ambassador Thomas McElhiney. How did the Embassy react to this sort of changeover?

SIMCOX: The Embassy liked Tom McElhiney, because he was one of our own. He was a career officer. He was very businesslike and concerned with the traditional mission of the Embassy. I personally liked Ambassador Williams. He was a political appointee and had rather unorthodox ways of running the mission. His priorities were often not those of the Department of State. So I think that, generally, the mission adjusted well to the change in ambassadors.

Q: Was Ambassador McElhiney career Foreign Service?

SIMCOX: Yes.

Q: After Ghana you returned to Washington and were assigned as a Special Assistant to the Under Secretary for Administration in the Office of Personnel. What sort of duties did this job encompass?

SIMCOX: Well, the first job was in the Office of Personnel in charge of domestic assignments. This was very much a bureaucratic job, working with all of the other personnel units, trying to get people assigned to positions in a group of bureaus—Washington bureaus, rather than the regional bureaus. This was a rather thankless task because in my experience the regional bureaus always got the cream of the crop, and the Washington bureaus, like Cultural Affairs, Intelligence and Research, and Consular Affairs, always seemed to be left over with no one or with the officers that were less distinguished or not desired by the regional bureaus.

Then I moved upstairs to become Special Assistant to the Under Secretary, because the Department of State was going through a process of management reform. This was causing a great deal of pain and required a lot of public relations attention. The reform of management in the Department of State is something that State passes through every three or four years, and my job was to work on that.

Q: Then, from September, 1972, to September, 1975, you were assigned as politico-military officer and as the counselor for political affairs at the American Embassy in Madrid. How were these two positions different?

SIMCOX: I went to Madrid as politico-military officer, as we have a number of Naval and Air bases there. Much of our diplomatic interaction with the Spanish involved military matters, so that we had a full-time position for that. The politico-military officer is accountable for all of these problems, and he also sits as an ex officio member—or he did then—of the Joint U. S.-Spanish Joint Military Commission, which had one general officer from each of the countries and one civilian. It was really an interesting job. We had been involved in those bases since the 1950's. The Franco regime was still in the saddle and still pretty much in control, but everyone saw the end coming. So nationalistic attitudes among the Spanish about the bases and about Spanish rights at the bases were becoming more prevalent. Public opinion was beginning to matter more noticeably in Spain.

So when I left that job and moved up to become political counselor, many of my activities also involved the whole military relationship with Spain. But there were other things happening in Spain at that time that made it very interesting. One aspect was the approaching end of the Franco regime: what would happen; would Spain become more democratic; what should be the United States role. The issue of human rights in foreign policy had just begun to surface. This was creating new pressures on us to take positions on Spain that, in the process, we had never taken before. We had pretty much refrained from questioning Franco's behavior internally. We began to take a more skeptical and more pro-democracy attitude toward the Spanish Government on human rights practices.

There were two things in Spain's own foreign policy that had a lot of significance for the United States.

One aspect was the beginning of the decolonization of the Spanish Sahara, part of which is now included in one of the countries of Morocco and Mauritania. The Polisario guerrillas were beginning their first campaign to try to drive out the Spanish. The Moroccans were starting their efforts to try to pick up pieces of the Spanish Sahara. Spanish rule ended peacefully, and this was all tied up with the politics of the Arab world. So it was an interesting process. Spain also, as you may remember, or whoever reads this interview may remember, simply let the Spanish Sahara go, under the aegis of the United Nations [UN]. Much of the territory was absorbed by Morocco. The Polisario guerrillas are still fighting to gain control of much of it.

The other aspect was the beginning of Basque terrorism in Spain. There had been a very strong Basque nationalist movement before then. It shouldn't have caught us by surprise that this movement would have such intensity and display such skills in terms of terrorism, in all of its dimensions. Probably the most important development during my tour in Spain was the day that Basque terrorists, known internationally as the ETA (initials standing for the Basque term, “Euzkadi Ta Akatasuna,” meaning Basque Fatherland and Liberty) mined a street two blocks from the Embassy that the Prime Minister drove over every day on his way to Mass. They waited for him to pass and detonated the mine just as his car passed over the spot and assassinated him. This was Prime Minister Admiral Carrero Blanco. The assassination of Carrero Blanco, in many ways, hastened the process of change in the Franco administration.

Q: When Spain executed five, convicted terrorists—I think this was in 1975—a number of allies condemned this. As you say, we had a big human rights movement active at the time. We were trying to renew our military bases arrangement in Spain. Secretary of State Kissinger was in Spain at the time, I think. How did the U. S. react to those executions and how did it affect our relationship with our allies?

SIMCOX: As far as our relationship with our allies was concerned, there was some strain with the Western European countries, particularly the Scandinavian countries and, to some extent, Britain and the Netherlands, due to the fact that we had such close contacts with Spain. In their view, Franco was a fascist and a virtual fellow traveler of Adolf Hitler. He led a fascist movement in Spain, overthrew a republican government back in the 1930's, and allegedly conducted mass extermination campaigns. Those European countries were never comfortable with the idea of our being “in bed” with Franco. For these reasons Spain was not admitted to NATO all of those years, even though the bases in Spain contributed to the NATO effort. So while we became more familiar with human rights concerns, I think I had left Spain by the time those particular executions took place. But it seems to me that one interesting sideline was the fact that the Department of State was more concerned about the appearances of these executions. The reason was that Spain still used the garrote to execute criminals, which is a process where you strangle a person to death by tightening a wire around his neck. I recall getting instructions from Washington to find out how garroting actually works, what is the degree of pain and suffering, and how long it takes someone to die who is garroted. So I sent in a little report on that, including some pictures I found. The Spanish were always saying that this was one of the most humane forms of execution—far more humane than hanging, since death comes more quickly.

Q: How did you find working under Ambassador Horacio Rivero?

SIMCOX: Well, he was my favorite. He was a Navy admiral, and I had high regard for him. We got along very well. He gave me a lot of leeway to do my job, such as when it looked as if there might be a war in North Africa between Algeria and Morocco over the Spanish Sahara. We were deeply involved in that together. So I think that he was a good choice to be a chief of mission. He spoke Spanish perfectly, of course, as he was Puerto Rican by origin.

Q: From Madrid you returned to Latin American affairs as Counselor of Embassy for Political Affairs in Brasilia until October, 1977. What was our policy in dealing with Brazil at that time?

SIMCOX: There's another country that had a military government for a number of years. It was just embarking on the process of questioning how much longer a military government should go on and what should lie beyond it. It was a mixed government. The military generally ran things, but they at least kept the trappings of a Congress, which was allowed to make policy on less important matters in which the military did not feel any strong interest.

Once again, our most troublesome concern was in the area of human rights. That was the area where the greatest tension was. Passionate feelings arose over differences between the Carter administration, on the one hand, and the Brazilians, on the other, regarding human rights standards, because there had been torture in Brazil. There was, indeed, a lot of torture. There always has been torture in Brazil. But when torture began to reach the upper middle class and was administered for political reasons, it sounded alarm bells in the western world, whereas the kind of torture which had been going on for centuries, against the working class and the farmers, never really was much a matter for concern.

There was a lot of tension there. I recall that Brazil broke off its military relationship with the U. S. This happened in 1976, because of what the Brazilian authorities regarded as a “humiliating” human rights report by the Department of State on the situation in Brazil.

Q: They actually said that the Brazilians were improving, didn't they? We had pretty close relations with Brazil. The Brazilian authorities were antagonized, also, by our opposing a deal which they had reached with Germany in connection with nuclear power plants.

SIMCOX: Yes. And there were a lot of trade tensions between the United States and Brazil because Brazil was becoming a major exporter of agricultural commodities, invading our

traditional markets. So we were using a lot of the machinery of our trade processes, like countervailing duties and anti-dumping laws, to try to block their exports. The Brazilian authorities saw all of this as one big ruse to cut down on Brazilian exports, a form of massive protectionism for which there was no justification.

But the nuclear issue—it's interesting to look back now. The Germans and Brazilians about 1977 announced an agreement to build a facility capable of producing highly enriched uranium that would have made it possible for Brazil to build nuclear bombs. I was there when then Deputy Secretary of State Christopher came to Brazil to reason with the government and to argue with the Brazilians personally, in an effort to persuade them to give up this idea. Throughout the two years that I was there we kept hearing assurances from our Brazilian colleagues in the Foreign Ministry and in the military, “Don't worry, even though this gives us the capability to build an explodable nuclear device. We want it for peaceful uses, so you needn't worry about any of these things.” Only after a number of years—I think it was in the last three or four years—has the press revealed that when a civilian government came into power in Brazil under President Collor. The man who was recently thrown out. They found that, in fact, the Brazilian Armed Forces had constructed a nuclear testing site in the Amazon capable of testing some sort of explodable, nuclear device.

Q: This happened at the same time when, I think, Argentina also wanted to build—I don't know whether they were trying to build a nuclear device. The Argentines were saying, well, we're not doing that. We respect the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, and they were saying that we are a sovereign nation and no one can tell us what to do.

SIMCOX: Yes.

Q: Since you were there toward the end of the Ford administration and the very beginning of the Carter administration, how did you see our relationship with Brazil change? I think that when Secretary of State Kissinger visited Brazil, at some point he made a comment

that Brazil was a leading Latin American country or some such thing as that. When President Carter came into office, a high U. S. official made a comment in a different South American country that we're not going to look at Brazil in the same light. Did that sort of thing cause diplomatic problems?

SIMCOX: I vaguely remember that. It was a short-lived sort of thing. It was one of those things that Foreign Service Officers dread, where your whole approach to a government has to change overnight on some key issue. In effect, you have to swallow your words or act as if the things you said in the past, under one administration, were never said, or certain positions were never taken. That's one of the things that really tests the mettle of a Foreign Service Officer. During my career I never felt really comfortable with that sort of thing. Administrations change, it is true, and they have different ideas. Unfortunately, I can't change that quickly.

Kissinger was never warm to the idea of human rights as a major foreign policy issue. He only, and reluctantly, got into it, due to prodding from Congress. When President Carter entered office, human rights were, of course, a major plank in his platform. He had people around him who attached the utmost importance to this issue. They were in key positions, like Andrew Young, who, you may recall, ran for governor of Georgia not too long ago.

We had taken a strong line with the Brazilians on their role in Angola, when the FPLN [People's National Liberation Front] was recognized as the government in Angola. The United States objected, and we put some pressure on Brazil not to recognize the FPLN but rather to wait until a consensus government emerged among the different, warring groups. But the Brazilians were eager to play a role in Africa. They felt some kinship with the FPLN personalities. The FPLN leaders were mestizos [of mixed white and black ancestry], and, of course, the same language was spoken in Brazil and Angola.

Brazil was very ambitious in its African policy in those days. I don't know how they are now. During the Ford administration we gave them all sorts of reasons why [recognition

and support of the FPLN] was a bad idea which would have dire consequences; the Cubans in Angola would be a force for disruption. And then the Carter administration came into office. He had people on his payroll who said just the opposite. Andrew Young made a statement that the Cubans in Angola are a force for stability [laughter]. So we had a situation where the Brazilians in the Foreign Ministry were quoting our own officials back to us. Their positions were based on what was being said back in Washington. Of course, we weren't getting any guidance—there was a lot of confusion in the Carter administration as to who spoke for what—who, what, and why. Cyrus Vance was Secretary of State, but he didn't assert a very strong hand, and some personalities like Carl McCall, Andrew Young, and Pat Derian, Hodding Carter's former wife, were running around, taking human rights to the brink, really. They didn't really represent the consensus on policy in the State Department. We somehow had to deal with them abroad, without instructions.

Q: After you served in Brazil, you returned to Washington as the Director of the Office of Mexican Affairs. How did your assignments to Mexico and to Latin American countries prepare you for this job and were you actually helping to formulate policy? Is that what your job actually involved?

SIMCOX: Mexico's relations with the United States are unique, in terms of the way they're handled in Washington. Literally, every agency of major importance—and most of the minor ones, too—has an interest in Mexico. They have developed their own channels of communication and have their own interests and their own counterparts in Mexico. They support each other. So when you talk about making policy toward Mexico, it's an extremely untidy process. Most of it takes place outside the Department of State—indeed, outside the cognizance of the Department of State. Just monitoring what was going on in our overall relationship with Mexico became a major effort on the Mexican desk. It was a major project just to find out what the Department of the Treasury and the Internal Revenue Service were planning to spring on the Mexicans. So it would be presumptuous to think

that this was a major policy-making job. The Mexican desk didn't make policy. On most issues the Department of State didn't make policy.

Mexico became more and more important during the two years I was in that job because of its production of oil. Each month it seemed that there was a new oil discovery, an increase in Mexico's reserves, and Mexico's production rose very rapidly. At the same time we were having trouble getting stable oil prices out of OPEC [Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries]. Mexico was seen as something like salvation by a lot of people. Its oil would somehow save us from high prices, future boycotts, and that sort of thing.

Also, when it came to producing a piece of legislation to control illegal immigration, to set up a system of sanctions against employers [of illegal immigrants], this aroused the Mexicans furiously. The Carter administration never got much support in Congress. So all this kind of legislation did was to make people mad, and then it died in Congress. After such legislation, in effect, died a polite death, the face-saving way out was for the Carter administration and Congress was to set up a special commission to study immigration. Such a special commission came into being in 1978 and lasted until 1981.

Trade with Mexico was a big issue at that time, because Mexico was becoming more and more productive. The “maquiladoras” [assembly plants] in Mexico near the U. S. border were a constant issue because we had all sorts of interest groups in Washington, like the AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations), the largest union organization in the United States, as well as other trade unions and industrial organizations, which were pushing for curbs on the ability of American producers to move their plants to Mexico, producing at a lower cost, and then re-exporting their products back to the United States without incurring any significant tariff charges. So trade was a constant problem.

So the major issues with Mexico involved immigration, trade, oil, human rights to some extent—although never to the extent they were a problem with Brazil. The Mexicans

were much more pragmatic about this. One thing I noticed about Mexico at that time was the sense in Washington that things were getting out of control in Mexico. Corruption, economic stagnation, and rapid population growth were seen as leading to—well no one seemed sure what. There was a feeling that the PRI [Institutional Revolutionary Party, the government party in office for many years] system might not be able to continue and that chaos would come back to Mexico, with enormous consequences for the United States. I think that this was a feeling in the White House and was shared by Secretary of State Cyrus Vance. Yet no one quite knew what to do about it. The best thing they could do was to call for a special presidential review on Mexico, where all agencies and all departments having an interest in the country would review the whole situation in Mexico and our current policy. We went through that exercise, and all of the attendant paper writing and meetings at increasingly higher levels. What came out of it was not much of a guide. It was basically more of the same—just to coordinate our relations better and try to bolster Mexico financially. The Treasury Department did that. There was some thought given to a special, $3.0 billion loan guarantee to Mexico to help it get its financial house in order and get people back to work. Unemployment is terrible down there.

The level of unemployment was beginning to show up in steadily rising levels of illegal immigration to the United States. The Mexican-American border was becoming a very disorderly place and still is a disorderly place, with rock throwings, shootings, juvenile vandalism, and all of that. But the Mexican administration at the time, controlled by the PRI, continued to the end of its term. It was replaced by President Miguel De la Madrid, who provided six years of indifferent leadership. Then President Salinas De Gortari came to power, some four and a half years ago. Mexico finally got some leadership and began really to change things. Mexico apparently has more inherent stability and an ability to absorb shocks than I may have thought.

Q: Since you have a special interest in immigration and negative population growth, how did you see that change, or what sort of things did you notice, since you were directly

concerned with Mexican affairs? That was in the late 1970's. Your first tour in Mexico was in the 1950's.

SIMCOX: There was a sharp contrast with the time when I went to Mexico in 1957. Mexico was then a nation of 35 million people. The capital city—Mexico City, where the Embassy was—had a population of 5.0 million. Now here we are in 1993. The country has 90 million people, and Mexico City has grown four-fold. Mexico City and its suburbs are now the world's largest city, according to the UN, with a population of 20 million people. The thing that struck me, when I was on the Mexican desk, was that the Mexicans themselves, since 1973, have suddenly become aware of the seriousness of the population problem and are beginning to put a lot of effort into turning the situation around. They welcomed international assistance for family planning and they invested a growing share of their own resources in family planning in all of its forms. In 1973 they even rewrote their own constitution to make family planning a “right.” What they began to do then is beginning to bear fruit now. The Mexican population growth rate has fallen remarkably. Unfortunately, there's so much momentum there, with so many young people of childbearing ages, that it will be a long time before we see any appreciable slowing in population growth.

Q: From September, 1979, to June, 1985, you served in various capacities, beginning with the position of Deputy Director in the Office of Management Operations. What is the purpose of the Office of Management Operations and what did your job entail?

SIMCOX: Well, the idea of management operations was to be to the Department of State what the OMB [Office of Management and Budget] is to the rest of the government —sort of a watchdog that encourages economy, efficiency, and rationality. The Office of Management Operations is the primary office supporting the Under Secretary for Management. The Under Secretary then was Ben Read. So, we were the OMB of the Department.

Q: And what did you do as Deputy Director of the Office of Management Operations?

SIMCOX: I was assigned a package of bureaus to be concerned with and specific issues as well. These issues included the question of accounting for positions, which is important to the financial management of the Department—how you keep control of decision making and how you develop a rational system for approving positions when they are needed, taking them back when there is no longer a need for them and investing them elsewhere. This is a very difficult thing to do in a culture like the State Department.

Q: Also during that time, from 1979 to 1985, you were named Ambassador-Designate to Mozambique in the Office of Southern African Affairs. However, you were not confirmed in this position. What happened during that time?

SIMCOX: I was nominated by President Carter to be Ambassador to Mozambique. They didn't get around to holding hearings on this appointment for a number of months, because Senator Jesse Helms was fighting a delaying action against the Carter administration. I can only guess at his motives. He was engaged in a personal conflict with the then Assistant Secretary for African Affairs, Richard Moose, and repeatedly tried to block appointments made during Moose's tenure. So [Senator Helms] felt that many of our ambassadors in Africa—particularly in southern African countries—as stated by his Special Assistant, John Carbaugh,—consider that their job is to go out there and “give lectures” to the South African Government about apartheid. He didn't like that. He wanted to be sure that any candidates [for the position of ambassador] that went out to southern Africa were even-handed and neutral in outlook. I think that there was the feeling among Republicans that the Democratic administration [under President Carter] was in trouble. In the last days of the campaign, the Republicans felt that they had a good chance to win the election, and they were just ready to promote their own. So I was one of several pending nominees for the position of ambassador left in the starting blocks, as it were, during that period. After the Republicans came in [in 1981] there was a long hiatus while they decided what they wanted to do about ambassadorial appointments. They thought about it and apparently were considering appointing me again, but then there was a serious diplomatic

incident between the United States and Mozambique, involving undercover intelligence work. In protest against the Mozambicans' expulsion of two or three of our diplomats, we simply decided to leave relations at the charg# d'affaires level, rather than to dignify them by appointing an ambassador. That situation continued for another year or so.

Q: Was it unusual that you were appointed to an African country when the rest of your career had been spent in Spanish-speaking countries? You had had one post in Ghana.

SIMCOX: I was one of two people in this position. You know, there are not a lot of people who are experienced in Portuguese Africa, so they had to create a corps of available officers. I had the combination of previous experience in Africa and a knowledge of Portuguese, so this was as good a recommendation as any.

Q: After that, of course, you were the Director of the El Salvador Task Force. What was the function of this organization?

SIMCOX: In effect, I volunteered for that job because I was “on hold.” Nothing was happening regarding my assignment to Mozambique. I was hanging around the Office of Southern African Affairs, but there really was no place for me there—even a place for me to sit. Once it became clear that it would be a long, long time before I would go to Mozambique, I said, well, I'm not just going to do nothing. I met a friend who was working for the El Salvador Task Force. I said, “I'll work with you.” So I joined him there. The Department had set up this Task Force in the early days after the U. S. decision, in effect, to intervene in El Salvador by sending a training mission to help the Salvadoran Government. There were so many public relations issues, so much Congressional mail to answer, and so many demands for information on what was going on. There was a need for on the spot policies about what this meant such as, “Are we getting into a new Vietnam?” So the Department set up this Task Force. There were about four or five of us who worked more or less separately throughout the Office of Central American Affairs. El Salvador normally only had one desk officer and maybe one secretary. So it was exciting.

There was a lot going on. It was a difficult time. Some of the things you read about now were in the process of developing then. The Salvadoran Army was out of control, the “death squads” were out of control. The question was how do we deal with this, how could we separate rumors from the facts about massacres. If there were massacres, where did we begin to piece information together regarding such matters? If we pieced it together, what could we do about it? The Salvadoran Army, which was under pressure from the rebels, was struggling to survive.

I took over this job after Archbishop Romero [Archbishop of San Salvador] was assassinated. His murder aroused a lot of hostility in the United States, especially in the Catholic community. There was the view that, if the United States was not implicated in the assassination, it was indifferent to it and wasn't doing enough to get to the bottom of it. Then we had the issue of the nuns who were killed, shortly before I came onto the task force. This became one of my special issues. I was in charge of liaison with the nuns' families and their supporters. That was a difficult time because there were a lot of strong feelings of anguish and anger about what had happened.

Q: How long did you work with the task force? Was it while you were waiting for your appointment to Mozambique to be settled?

SIMCOX: Yes.

Q: Actually, what was your status while you were waiting?

SIMCOX: Well, it was clear that I would have to wait for a long time for assignment. In such a situation you're supposed to go into a pool of officers that can be given short-term assignments. So rather than let myself be given assignments of that kind, I preferred to pick some place where the work would be exciting.

Q: After the El Salvador Task Force you went on to become a diplomat in residence at the University of Louisville.

SIMCOX: Yes.

Q: How did that come about and what did you do as a diplomat in residence?

SIMCOX: That was a result of more diplomatic folderol. I was to be assigned as Special Assistant to the Secretary for Intergovernmental Relations, an office that had been created about four years before. This was a job where I would be in contact with state, city, and local governments about all sorts of issues, including international matters. I was no sooner assigned to that job than the Under Secretary for Management abolished the job without warning. So I had no assignment. I was up in the air again with no place to go. I couldn't go back to the El Salvador Task Force. A friend of mine in Personnel called and said, “We don't have much for you, but if you would like to, you could be a diplomat in residence at the University of Louisville for a year.” I said, “Fine, that sounds good.”

A diplomat in residence is like a visiting professor. He gets his salary and expenses paid, gets an office at a university, and they use him as they see fit—as a guest lecturer, for example. In my case, I was a guest lecturer. During the second semester I was asked to give my own course on African politics. As long as you're there, you're expected to travel around the region where you are assigned, handling public affairs assignments. You know, the Office of Public Affairs in Washington is sort of a clearing house for all sorts of requests that come in for speakers. So, rather than send people out from Washington, as long as they have somebody who has the confidence to speak on certain subjects, they just detail him to do the job. You are also expected to participate in the recruiting efforts of the Board of Examiners by going out and making calls at colleges, including black colleges or those with a heavy minority element, trying to encourage interest in the Foreign Service examination and careers in the State Department. So I did all of those things.

I was supposed to concentrate to some extent also on Ohio and Tennessee.

Q: And it appears that your last assignment was as political adviser to the Commandant of the Coast Guard. What did you do in this capacity?

SIMCOX: All of the major military commands have what they call a State Department political adviser. The idea is that the Commander concerned has available to him someone who is knowledgeable about diplomacy and international relations, to help out in the decisions they make, to be sure that political angles are considered and that the Department of State is informed. This is a polite kind of espionage, keeping the Department informed about what the military are doing.

In this case the Coast Guard is a very operationally oriented organization. It has its task before it every day, doing a million things, beside its training mission. When I got there, I realized that they really have a very large, international involvement, constantly working on the edges of some very surprising issues. Among other things, very few people know that we have a maritime boundaries dispute with the Soviet Union, now Russia, in the northern Pacific. There was constant tension there, at that time, over who had jurisdiction over fishing regulations in a pie-shaped section of the northern Pacific south of Alaska and in the Bering Sea. There were contacts with Cuba regarding our maritime frontier. I took some international trips with the Commandant. We went to West Africa, visiting eight countries on his way to a meeting of the International Maritime Organization—I guess it was held in Abidjan [Ivory Coast]. We also visited Liberia and showed the flag there.

I worked on narcotics affairs. The Coast Guard was heavily involved in interdiction and working with foreign countries on intercepting vessels from various countries believed to be carrying narcotics. I helped to arrange for diplomatic clearances to allow the Coast Guard to board and search such vessels.

Q: What made you decide to retire?

SIMCOX: Well, the truth is that not everyone leaves the Foreign Service voluntarily. The Foreign Service has new legislation, adopted in the early 1980's, which created what are called “limited career extensions.” Once you have such an appointment, you have a three year period to be promoted. If you don't get promoted, you don't get a further, “limited career extension,” and you must retire. In effect, they found me no longer needed. I accepted retirement gracefully and went my way. I don't know what other retired diplomats you interview are going to tell you on this matter. The fact is that many people who have served in the Foreign Service are reluctant to admit that they did not retire voluntarily. I see no shame in this. It's just the way the system works. Not everyone can become Secretary of State.

Q: Did they have any regulations like this before the Foreign Service Act of 1980 was passed?

SIMCOX: There was a provision before the Act of 1980 providing for the “selection out” of certain officer, but this provision was very rarely applied. There was such a surplus of senior officers at that time that they realized that they would have to do something to step up the “weeding out” process. Otherwise, the younger officers wouldn't have any positions to aspire to. It's very important to have an orderly “flow through” of people. Those who really have ability should move up, when positions are available for them to move up to. Those who don't have such abilities move slowly, either going into highly specialized jobs or dropping out of the competition.

Q: Well, what did you think of your diplomatic life?

SIMCOX: When you look back on it, all of these issues that you worked on and where you made change happen all seem lost in history now. The significance of what we did may escape us. I felt that I was probably most efficient and did my best work in Spain and Brazil. That is when I was at the peak of my powers, as a political counselor and also as a negotiator. I believe that the reporting and the negotiation which I did in both of those

assignments were about as good as the Foreign Service can offer. I was recognized for it. I was promoted. At times I look back and wonder whether Spain would have turned out otherwise, without me there. I think that I took a special interest in and encouraged the forces of change. I maintained contact with the democratic sectors of Spanish society when they were virtually living underground. I gave them encouragement and hope. I think that I encouraged the moderates, rather than the radicals. I believe that this has made some small difference in the way Spain has turned out as a democratic, Europeanized country.

Q: So what were your greatest frustrations?

SIMCOX: Well, there are a lot of things I would not do over again. I made a lot of mistakes which I would have avoided now. While I was the Director of Mexican Affairs, I somehow alienated the Foreign Minister of Mexico, so much so that he personally asked me to stay away from him. It was quite a setback for someone who, as country director, was responsible for relations with a particular country, to be told by that country's foreign minister that he would have nothing more to do with him.

Q: Was this purely a personal thing?

SIMCOX: I think it was partly personal and partly the nature of the Foreign Minister. I guess I have to admit that it was partly due to my own style of operating. He told me that he wanted nothing further to do with me, not once, but twice. He denounced me to my superiors and said that he couldn't work with me.

Q: Did you feel that way about him?

SIMCOX: No, I didn't. I felt that I could work with him, but the fact is that he was a confused man. He had had no previous, diplomatic experience himself when the President of Mexico appointed him Foreign Minister. He did not come out of the Mexican career diplomatic service. He didn't last very long before the President came to realize that this

man just didn't have the experience and did things “on the fly” without prior consultation. The President relieved him as Foreign Minister after about a year and a half, replacing him with a professional, career-oriented official. So, in some ways, I guess I survived him. Still, the fact is that you've got to be able to get along with all kinds of people. I've always regretted what happened. If I had it to do all over again, I would certainly change the way I acted.

Q: Well, with the benefit of hindsight, how do you view life in the Foreign Service?

SIMCOX: I won't be one of those who say, “There's nothing like it.” And I'm not one of those that will say, “I would recommend this career to my children.” I have one son who wanted to go into the Foreign Service. I could tell by his temperament and his love of overseas matters and foreign languages that he would have been pretty good at it. So I didn't discourage him but I didn't make it appear that he could only satisfy me by following the career that I followed. He never made it because he didn't score high enough on the Foreign Service exam. He passed it but he didn't score high enough to be selected. He now has another job in the international affairs field in another agency where he uses his language, which is Arabic, and does the things he would have done in the Foreign Service. So things worked out well for him.

I guess we all have regrets. I've reflected at some length on the hardships which the pattern of assignments which I had created for my children. There are times when I think that maybe I wasn't fair to them, in exposing them to that life style. I may not have had their interests sufficiently in mind. I was more concerned about my own career than about their education and sense of stability. So I'm not sure. I have a lot of mixed feelings about it.

Q: Well, do you have anything further to say before we end the interview?

SIMCOX: No, but I think that it has been a good experience for me to try to remember all these things. I hope that you will note that, as time goes by, my memory for some of these

things has become somewhat vague. And, of course, I have seen myself, in effect, as the hero of the story. I'm sure that you'll take that into account, and anyone using this interview will treat it with the necessary grain of salt.

Q: Well, thank you very much, Mr. David Simcox.

SIMCOX: Thank you.

End of interview